

Family violence and its toll on kids

By SARAH PRITCHARD and GRACE CHANG
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When it comes to kids living in a chaotic or stressed-out household, how many times have we said or heard, "Oh, they're too young -- they don't even know the difference." This is most poignantly the reality for children living in the deep shadow of domestic violence.

October is Domestic Violence Prevention Awareness Month, and eight times out of 10, a domestic abuse case involves children. Let us not overlook the mental, emotional and physical scars that affect so many children's lives because of domestic violence.

Our society is clear on damaging consequences to the battered, but are we clear on the consequences for the witnessing child? Many times the silent injuries of children growing up in violent homes are underestimated and overlooked. Does witnessing violence affect children? Yes! Not only does physical infliction of violence affect the child, but, just witnessing violence can have lasting affects on a baby or child's developing brain.

An estimated one out of every four children in California is directly exposed to violence as a victim or witness. New scientific research has shown that exposure to violence has a measurable physiological impact on a child's developing brain. The importance of quality early childhood experiences is a critical path to reducing the cycle of violence that repeats itself from generation to generation.

As a parent, it is important to be aware of the potential consequences that chronic exposure to violence may have on a child, such as increased depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, anger issues, eventual risk of alcohol and drug abuse, and lower academic achievement.

When a child is exposed to domestic violence, the fear and the reverberation causes the child's brain to stay in the survival mode, thus compromising the child's ability to focus on learning, reasoning skill building, and most tragically, wiring the brain to be violent.

It is critical to view the issue of domestic violence as family violence. Each time we encounter domestic abuse, let us look for the child. And for each time we witness a child acting out, let us think twice about blaming the child for their actions and more about what resources that child might need.

To learn more the impact family violence has on our community and to show your support, join us for the Family Violence Vigil at 6 p.m. on Thursday at the Veterans' Memorial Park in Napa.

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